

INTENTION AND THE EXPLANATION OF HUMAN ACTIONS

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1. In 'Three Ways of Spilling Ink' J.L. Austin introduces the notion of intention in this way:

"As I go through life, doing, as we suppose, one thing after another, I in general always have an idea — some idea, my idea, or picture, or notion, or conception — of what I'm up to, what I'm engaged in, what I'm about, or in general 'what I'm doing' . . . I must be supposed to have *as it were* a plan, an operation-order or something of the kind on which I'm acting, which I am seeking to put into effect, carry out in action: only of course nothing necessarily or, usually, even faintly, so full-blooded as a plan proper".⁽¹⁾

When we draw attention to this aspect of action, we use the words connected with intention.

In the same passage, Austin (acknowledging Anscombe⁽²⁾) points out that the kind of knowledge involved in intention is not knowledge following observation.

"I don't 'know what I'm doing' as a result of looking to see or otherwise conducting observations: only in rare and perturbing cases do I *discover* what I've done or *come to realize* what I am or have been doing in this way. It is not in such fashion that I know what I'm doing when I strike the match in the vicinity of the haystack".⁽³⁾

Austin asks us to *contrast* the sense in which 'in general and obviously' (i.e. in doing something intentionally) I know what I'm doing with the sense

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1. J.L. Austin, 'Three Ways of Spilling Ink', *Philosophical Papers*, ed. J.O. Urmson and G.J. Warnock, 3rd edition, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1979, p. 283.

2. See G.E.M. Anscombe, *Intention*, 2nd ed., Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1963, paras. 8,9,16, 28–32.

3. 'Three Ways', p. 283.

"in which you *suppose*, dubiously, that I know what I'm doing when I strike the match so close to the gasoline".⁽⁴⁾

Austin's example gives us the opportunity to clarify some of the misunderstanding which the expression 'knowing without observation' can give rise to. Here I am, sitting by the haystack, five minutes before I strike the match, mentally rehearsing the details of a carefully worked out plan and letting nobody into the secret. The kind of knowledge I have of my intentions in this situation is both non-observational and private — in the sense that *you*, for example, sitting nearby and eyeing me with suspicion — will never know what my intentions are unless I tell you (without lying).

But now let us proceed to the stage where my intentions are going to issue, or become embodied, as we say, in action. I strike the match in the vicinity of the haystack. At this point both you and I can observe (see) what I am doing; and although, for a short while yet, only *I* may know what I'm up to, if and when I proceed to set fire to the haystack, then my intentions no longer remain hidden from you; and what you feared and suspected — and I non-observationally knew — that I would do, now both of us know that I have done.

2. We may contrast this story with one of those "rare and perturbing cases where I *discover* what I've done or *come to realize* what I am or have been doing . . . as a result of looking to see or otherwise conducting observations". If I absentmindedly flick my cigarette-ash in your brandy, then I can come to realize or discover by observation what I have absentmindedly done (I come to realize what I've done as soon as I see the ash floating in your drink). Even here, however, what I discover with observation is *not* my intention (for I did not flick my ash into your glass intentionally), but *what I did*. If, before I realized what I'd done, you quickly hid your drink behind your back and asked me 'What have you done just now?', I might still have answered 'I flicked my cigarette ash in a glass ashtray' — believing (wrongly) that *that* was what I had done. I knew, without observation, what my intention was; I discovered, or came to realize later, following observation, what I'd done.

Consider another example. I am playing an old and fairly complicated Chinese board game, or one whose rules I have read and learnt and you haven't. You observe in silence as I move the red and blue counters up and down the board and turn the cards one at a time with each throw of the dice. After ten minutes of careful watching you confidently announce: 'Now I see

4. *Ibid.* A.R. White suggests that we interpret the distinction between 'knowledge through observation' and 'knowledge without observation' in terms of the distinction between consciousness and realisation. "The example given of things known without observation, such as the position of one's limbs, one's reflex kick or spasm or any one of one's intentional actions, are all of the things which one would be said to be conscious of, but not things one knows of by coming to realize or by discovering that they have happened". A.R. White, *Attention*, Oxford, Basil Blackwell (1964), p.63.

what you're doing'. What is it you see now which only a minute ago you weren't seeing? Certainly not a new move or series of moves. What you come to see or discover is a plan. You understand the rules of the game. You discover, come to realize, what my intentions are, what I'm doing or trying to achieve.⁽⁵⁾

Although intentions are 'private' in the precise sense already described – the sense in which, in general, I can decide not to reveal my intentions 'before the right time' – in another sense they are as public as my words and actions. Intentions are embodied in actions: they are typically intentions to act and are therefore essentially world-involving. This is what we mean when we say that you can 'read' or 'see' my intentions in my actions.

3. One of the central tenets of a rather widespread and influential trend in art criticism which flourished in the late forties and fifties, and which came to be known as the New Criticism, was that considerations of the artist's intentions are not relevant to the evaluation of art. This view seems to be the perfect mirror image of the view, held by some Idealist philosophers, that we should totally ignore the work of art and concentrate upon the artist's intentions. Both these doctrines, as Richard Wollheim points out, share a common assumption, namely,

"that there exist inner states of a certain kind – states which occur frequently in the process of making – and which can be understood independently of the product in which they issue".⁽⁶⁾

The examples discussed above show why this assumption is mistaken.

4. We must distinguish, more systematically than Austin does, between the various uses of the concept of intention described by Anscombe,⁽⁷⁾ namely, doing something intentionally, doing it with a further intention, and intending to do it.

If I do something, such as play the piano, with the intention of doing another thing, such as give pleasure to my friends, then I do the first thing intentionally. But I may play the piano without having any further intention. This would not mean that I play the piano unintentionally. Further, I may now intend to play the piano next week. But despite my intention, for reasons within or beyond my control, I may not play the

5. You need not, of course, discover all these things simultaneously or all at once. I can see that you are trying to make your black man jump over the other player's white man, but I do not necessarily understand your strategy or aim. I can see that you've got to put a black card on a red, or vice versa, and that you're not allowed to put two blacks or two reds together, but I do not yet understand *why* you're doing it. Grasping what an agent's intentions are is not an all-or-nothing affair. It might happen in stages. And you might infer to rules from intentions, or the other way round.

6. Bryan Magee, 'Conversation with Richard Wollheim', in *Modern British Philosophy*, London, Secker & Warburg (1971), 185–6.

7. G.E.M. Anscombe, *Intention*, para 1.

piano next week. It may happen as simply as this: I change my mind, or I forget. Some of our intentions, like some of our promises, remain unfulfilled, are not carried out or put into effect.⁽⁸⁾

The use of 'I intend' in 'I intend to Φ ', Austin remarks,

"is, as it were, a sort of 'future tense' of the verb 'to Φ '. It has a vector, committal effect like 'I promise to Φ ', and, again, like 'I promise to Φ ', it is one of the possible formulas for making explicit, on occasion, the force of 'I shall Φ ' (namely, that it was a declaration and not, for example, a forecast or an undertaking)".⁽⁹⁾

Actually, 'I will come to the meeting' is much stronger than 'I intend to come to the meeting' in giving assurance about my coming to the meeting.⁽¹⁰⁾ Austin makes virtually the same remark in connection with the stronger commitment involved in saying 'I promise to come to the meeting' rather than saying merely 'I intend to come to the meeting'.

"When I say 'I promise' a new plunge is taken: I have not merely announced my intention, but, by using this formula . . . I have bound myself to others, and staked my reputation, in a new way".⁽¹¹⁾

5. Austin compares intention to a miner's lamp on our forehead

"which illuminates always just so far ahead as we go along".⁽¹²⁾

Although Austin says that

"it is not to be supposed that there are any precise rules about the extent and degree of illumination it sheds",⁽¹³⁾

he is, nevertheless, keen to emphasize that

"the illumination is always *limited*, and that in several ways. It will never extend indefinitely far ahead".⁽¹⁴⁾

I do not think that Austin is right in making this restriction, nor in thinking of it as a general rule (in fact as 'the only general rule')⁽¹⁵⁾; for it is clear that apart from the day-to-day intentions which Austin seems to have in mind, we also form long-term plans according to which we conduct our affairs. It is generally in the light of these long-term intentions that our lives

8. "A man can form an intention which he then does nothing to carry out, either because he is prevented or because he changes his mind: but the intention itself can be complete, although it remains a purely interior thing". Anscombe, *Intention*, p.9.

9. 'Three Ways', p. 279.

10. See Brice Noel Fleming, 'On Intention', *Philosophical Review* LXXIII (1964), p. 304.

11. J.L. Austin, 'Other Minds', *Philosophical Papers*, op. cit., p. 99.

12. 'Three Ways', p. 284.

13. *Ibid.*

14. *Ibid.*

15. *Ibid.*

and careers are structured and that a great deal of our activities form a coherent pattern. So, with regard to our intentions for the future, there doesn't seem to be any restriction limiting the time over which they can extend. I may intend to go to the cinema tomorrow, but I may also intend to send my son to University in ten years' time. And many people intend to stay in their job until they retire. These intentions extend a very long way into the future, though certainly not 'indefinitely'. (But note: 'I intend to buy a boat *someday*').

On the other hand, as far as acting intentionally is concerned, we do not have to engage in any thought process before acting. Nor do we have to form the intention to ϕ in order to ϕ intentionally. Even the most unreflective and habitual actions can be intentional.⁽¹⁶⁾ None of the things we do as a matter of routine have to be preceded by any particular intention or thought-process for them to be intentional. What we do intentionally, although of course we may have intended to do it, we can do without any forethought at all.

6. Austin notes, moreover, that 'intentionally' cannot be used to describe a certain *style* or manner of performance, as 'deliberately' can and 'purposefully' always does. Anscombe makes the same point when she says that intention is not 'a style-characteristic of observable human proceedings'.⁽¹⁷⁾

7. Austin is right, I think, to connect the concept of intention with that of knowing, or having an idea, of what we're up to or of what we're doing. However, if an action is the doing of many things, then we must make sure that, in asking whether someone knew what he was doing, we mention the *relevant* thing among the things he did. If you want to know whether I trod on the snail intentionally, then at least you must find out whether I knew that I was treading on it. Like the legendary Thales I may have been so completely absorbed in contemplating the stars that I didn't notice the poor creature at my feet. Or, I may know that in treading (intentionally this time) on the snail I am making Peter sad, but I may be quite unintentionally making Peter sad — what I do intentionally (what I *mean* to do) is prevent the snail from eating your fresh cabbages. Finally, I may tread on the snail intending to make Peter sad, without knowing whether my treading on the snail will make him sad or not. Nevertheless, I tread on it *just in case*.

16. See A.R. White: "Carelessly, impulsively or automatically throwing away a lighted match does not preclude my having thrown it away intentionally or with the intention of protecting my new gloves. It is worth emphasising the compatibility of automatic and intentional actions, since it throws doubt on the traditional view that an intentional action is one immediately preceded by the thought of doing it". *Attention*, p. 19.

Compare, Larry Wright 'Emergency Behaviour', *Inquiry* 17 (1974), 43-7; and James Hopkins, 'Mental States, Natural Kinds and Psychophysical Laws', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* LII (1978), 221-36; and contrast D.G. Brown, *Action*, Toronto University Press (1968).

17. G.E.M. Anscombe, *Intention*, p. 30.

Again, if I succeed, then there is no doubt that I have intentionally made him sad.⁽¹⁸⁾ This is the rather interesting case, quite common in everyday life, where I do not know (cannot tell) in advance what the result of my action will be, but only what it *may* be – or what I hope it will be, or strongly desire it should be – and have to decide whether or not to take the risk.

Although Austin says that

“all that is to follow, or to be done thereafter, is not what I am intending to do, but perhaps consequences or results or effects thereof”,⁽¹⁹⁾

our analysis shows that among the consequences of our actions we must distinguish between those which are intended and those which are not.

8. What is the relation between Φ -ing intentionally and wanting to Φ ? As with the relation between knowing and intending, it is rather complex; for I may either want or not want to do what I do intentionally. Sam may set fire to his house intentionally and quite cheerfully – it's such an eyesore, and it's full of rats, and he's been wanting to get rid of it for years, only he couldn't get the permission to burn it down, but now. . . Or he may set fire to the house intentionally but quite reluctantly and unwillingly – it had become too small for the family, certainly, and he had to build a new one to please his wife, still he couldn't bear the thought of seeing his little old cottage go up in flames. Many of the things we do, we do only as means to end; and of these some are undesirable in themselves. Sheila has an obsessive fear of the dentist's chair; still she decides to face up to the ordeal in order to get rid of her toothache, which has become quite unbearable.

9. A discussion of intention in terms of knowing (§7) and wanting (§8) has the advantage of bringing together the two elements which most philosophers writing on the subject have thought of as constitutive of rational behaviour. In this tradition, intentional action is seen as resulting, via the right causal links, from appropriate beliefs and desires.⁽²⁰⁾ When I

18. This will be true even if I remain ignorant of my success. Other examples (1) I may intend to make Sue happy by sending her a rose. I succeed in making Sue happy in this way but for a year I have no means of finding out. (Sue lives in New Zealand and she dislikes writing letters even to people who make her happy by sending her roses). It seems clear that I have made Sue happy intentionally without knowing that I have. (Of course this does not mean that I made Sue happy by accident; for I *meant* to make her happy and her happiness is a consequence of my action).

(2) I fire the torpedo with the intention of sinking the *Bismarck*. If I sink the *Bismarck* I sink it intentionally – even though I might not know (yet) that I've sunk it. This account of intention has the (Davidsonian) feature of giving 'intending to Φ ' primary status. See D. Davidson, 'Intending', *Essays on Actions and Events*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1980, chapter 5.

19. 'Three Ways', p.284.

20. The seminal paper in this area in recent philosophy is Davidson's 'Actions, Reasons and Causes'. See also Christopher Peacocke, *Holistic Explanation*, Oxford Clarendon Press (1979); David Wiggins, 'Weakness of Will, Commensurability, and the Objects of Deliberation and Desire', in A.O. Rorty, *Essays on Aristotle's Ethics*, London, University of California Press, (1980), p.245.

want to explain to an interested or inquisitive audience why I did what I did on a particular occasion, I do so typically by mentioning a belief and a desire. Why did you switch on the television set at that time of night? There was a boxing match being shown live via satellite from America which I wanted to watch. My belief that the event was being televised, coupled with my desire to watch the match, explain why I pressed the button. This simple model can be seen to work even on those occasions when, as often happens, the agent acts on a mistaken belief that something is the case. My mistaken belief that it is Friday, together with my desire to watch the late Friday film, explains why I press the button on Thursday night.

10. Aristotle's practical syllogisms offer explanations of actions which reconstruct, in the way just described, the reasons the agent himself has for his action. Austin followed Aristotle more or less closely in describing the various stages which lead to action, together with the dangers attending each successive stage. Aristotle's first or major premiss mentions a desire, or at any rate something of which there could be a desire (*orexis*).⁽²¹⁾ The desire may be for something quite generic (e.g. physical fitness or health) or for something which the agent considers good or attractive in the situation (e.g. a desire to watch a favourite television programme). The second or minor premiss mentions the opportunity presented here and now to the agent which, if taken, could lead to the satisfaction of the desire expressed in the major premiss. If the agent decides to take the opportunity, then his action could be explained in the light of its antecedents (i.e. in terms of the reasons the agent has for doing what he does). His desire to keep healthy and his belief that going for a walk in the parks is one thing he could do (in the circumstances) to keep healthy, explain why he puts on his track-suit and goes for a walk.

Two remarks are called for here. *a*. The question one aims to answer in seeking to provide an explanation of action is: what was the reason the agent had for doing what he did? To answer that question it will not be sufficient to provide *any* reason, for it can easily be the case that the agent had such a reason and either did not proceed to do what he had good reason for doing, or did what he did for some quite different reason. The doctor says I should go for long walks because this would keep me healthy. I resolve to go for long walks because I care about my health. The telephone rings. A friend, who lives two miles away, invites me to go and have tea with him. Though it is a rather long walk, I decide to go on foot. I take this decision without thinking for a moment about my health, or about the doctor's advice. Although I have a good reason for taking long walks, I do not, in this particular instance, act *for* that reason. In giving explanations for actions we must establish not only that the agent had a reason for acting, but that

21. See G.E.M. Anscombe, 'On Practical Reasoning', in Joseph Raz ed., *Practical Reasoning*, Oxford University Press (1978), pp.32–45; and also G.H. Von Wright, 'On so-called Practical Inference', in the same collection (Raz), pp.46–62.

that reason was *efficacious* in the context. In other words we must show that the agent acted *for* or *because of* that reason.

b. The second point is this. From the fact that we explain actions by mentioning antecedent desires and beliefs we should not conclude that whenever we detect, in ourselves or in others, the presence of a particular belief or desire, then we can *predict* that such-and-such an action will occur. There simply are no laws stating that if an agent has such-and-such desires, or if he entertains such-and-such beliefs, then, he will act in such-and-such a way.⁽²²⁾ As Davidson puts it:

“There is no more reason to suppose that a person who has reasons for acting will always act on them than to oppose that a person who has beliefs which entail a certain conclusion will draw that conclusion”.⁽²³⁾

22. A.J. Ayer once suggested that the main characteristic of explanations in terms of reasons is that “They serve to establish a lawlike connection between different pieces of behaviour”. (A.J. Ayer, ‘Man as a Subject for Science’, *Metaphysics and Common Sense*, London, Macmillan, 1969, p.230). But as C.A.B. Peacocke has recently shown, “There is no correlation between beliefs and action-types such that necessarily anyone who has a given belief performs an action of the kind correlated with that belief”. (C.A.B. Peacocke, *Holistic Explanation*, op. cit. p.5).

23. D. Davidson, ‘Freedom to Act’, in *Essays on Actions and Events*, op. cit., p.77.